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Bunker and Komer Quietly Pressing For Reforms in Saigon Regime

SAIGON—With the express consent of Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, a liberal Democrat from California conveyed a polite but tough message to President-elect Nguyen Van Thieu shortly after the election here.

The message: Broaden your government, Mr. President-elect, and reform your programs or you take the fatal risk of losing the support of the American people in your war against the north.

The man who delivered this message, Robert Coate, is one of the very few Democratic Party officials who has publicly joined a campaign by party liberals to force a peace plank on President Johnson in next year's Democratic convention.

The point to note, however, is not Coate's credentials but the steel in Ambassador Bunker's patrician spine. For the big news here this year is that Bunker, pacification chief Robert Komer, and Deputy Ambassador Edwin Locke are trying for the first time to use the full weight of U.S. power to convince Thieu and his new government (not yet selected) that U.S. patience is not inexhaustible.

Bunker is a subtle diplomat whose serene composure scarcely matches his steely backbone. It was



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Bunker who, as much as any one, pulled Lyndon Johnson's chestnut out of the Dominican fire in 1965-1966. He knows today that the Vietnamese politicians and generals are less immune to the warnings of a U.S. politician than of a diplomat. U.S. ambassadors (five in five years) have never yet made credible threats to the Vietnamese government. Their voice is far softer than U.S. opinion polls, as transmitted by U.S. politicians.

BUT IN ADDITION to politicians like Coate and Republican Sen. Thomas Kuchel, also of California, who saw Thieu in September, the Bunker-Komer team has made solid gains in the campaign to compel the Saigon government to shape up. It is an open secret here, for example, that two province Police chiefs are now under intensive investigation by Premier Nguyen Kao Ky, to the delight of the Americans. The province chief of a key coastal region in the midlands is being allowed to "resign" because Premier Ky correctly decided he had become a liability.

This is the barest start of housecleaning that is far, far overdue, and it would be foolish to expect too much.

Beyond that, however, the Bunker-Komer team is quietly pressing for a quite different kind of reform that could have dramatic effects on the caliber of officials in the central, provincial, and district governments. This is the long-overdue reform of pay scales.

Thus Bunker, as chief U.S. spokesman, and Komer, whose work in pacification interlocks with the province and district chiefs at every level, are pushing for higher pay scales and fringe benefits, both to reward the dedicated few and to open the buddy-buddy form of government bureaucracy (a general, his brother and cousins all in high positions) to competition based on merit.

STILL ANOTHER reform high on the Bunker list is a major decentralization of the Saigon government, with far more power going into province and district hands. The reason is obvious. In defending against an ugly combination of civil and aggressive warfare, which is different in every province and district and even within districts, centralized control makes no sense.

The Bunker-Komer effort is based on the old carrot-and-stick formula, and publicly they emphasize the carrot. Behind the scenes, however, the stick is being swung with a gusto not witnessed here since President Truman threw in his lot against the Communists and with the French in 1950 and President Eisenhower dispatched the first U.S. advisers. It's a healthy sign, and the political realities back home demand no less.

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